



## God's Faithfulness to the Faithless People: Trends in Interpretation of Luke-Acts

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*Quid sibi videatur Israhel?* This question about the Christian opinion of Israel was raised again and again by Christian theologians and writers in the second and third Christian centuries. The question about the fate of Israel was not solved at that time. The opinions differed. Was Israel condemned by God and replaced by the church, the new Israel? Or was there in the end of times a hope for the salvation of the totality of the old people of God? What do we actually mean when talking about "Israel"? As we know, this question is not solved even today.

A look into the New Testament shows us that the answers to the question about Israel differ in the various writings:

- for Matthew, Israel has been replaced by another people, coming from all gentile peoples: Matt 8:11-13; 21:43; 27:15-26
- Paul grants Israel, as the people of God, a general amnesty, since the whole of Israel after a temporary rejection shall be saved at the end of times: Romans 11
- the Gospel of John shows that, throughout the history of Israel, there were always two groups among the people; these groups were separated through the coming of Messiah-Jesus. Only one of the groups is and has ever been Israel, and this group is found in the church

For years interpreters found a solution in Luke-Acts and its *Heilsgeschichte*: Israel was bygone history, something of the past; the church of the gentiles continued the history of the old people, but was something completely different. The question of the fate of Israel was not a burning one for Luke, the historian.

### I. THE JEWISHNESS OF LUKE-ACTS

In the last decade, however, we find a new trend in the interpretation of Luke, and this is centered around the old question of the fate and meaning of Israel for the church. We have seen what may be called the Jewishness of Luke's work:

- the *christology* shows us the most Jewish Messiah within the New Testament; Luke is not talking about the church as "church," but as the people of God
- the promises of *salvation* are given to Israel and never taken away from the people
- the *law*, the *torah*, has full validity for Christians of Jewish origin, and for others (gentiles) in the form of the apostolic decree
- only a Jew could understand all the *Jewish words, conceptions, and customs* in Luke 1 to Acts 28, and only in a few cases does Luke give us an explanation

- *Paul* is presented to us in an unfamiliar way, not as the apostle to the gentiles, but to the Jews
- Luke is writing mostly in a *Jewish language*: in biblical Greek, influenced by the Septuagint

What does this mean? May we use the label “history”? The common opinion has been that Luke is writing the history of the first periods of the early church, he himself belonging to the third generation of Christians, with a safe distance from the actual occurrences. He is advocating the historic roots of the church.

But that is no answer. We will not discuss whether Luke is a historian, but what it means when we label him “historian.” Above all, Luke is an exegete, an interpreter of the Scriptures. And when dealing with holy Scriptures, there is no longer any safe distance from the occurrences they report, that is, from history. Especially if Scripture contains the will of God, the law. Then this kind of history is normative; it places obligations on the present, or gives us warning examples. A history given in the Scriptures is, in that sense, contemporary history. And nothing in history can be “only” history. For Luke, the move made by Paul in Galatians is impossible; i.e., talking about the law as valid only in an epoch of history. What kind of history does Luke give us? Certainly not one to preserve records for posterity. He is obviously writing history about his own time. And when he reads history (that is, the Scriptures) he is even then reading about his own time. This is because the Scriptures reveal the everlasting will of God. So if the Scriptures talk about Israel as the only chosen people of God, there cannot be another Israel outside the Bible.

An obstacle to coming to grips with Luke’s theology, and above all his Jewishness, is the deadlock we have reached when it comes to an understanding of the history of primitive Christianity, from the very beginning to the end of the first period. The common chronology has been this: first period, (Palestinian) Jewish Christianity; second period, Hellenistic Jewish Christianity, gentile Christianity, and Paul, existing side-by-side; third period—when Luke lived—gentile Christianity. In the second period, after 48 A.D., Jewish Christianity was forced back and acted solely on the defensive; in the third period, after 70 A.D., Jewish Christianity mostly disappeared. Jewish Christians returned to the synagogue, became gentile Christians, or settled as isolated Christian-Jewish sects. That is what most call “Jewish Christianity.”

The problem with this conception is that the construct is monocausal; there is

only one line of development. This scheme predestines the interpretation of Luke-Acts and its notion about the people of God. According to the scheme, it is simply impossible that a Jewish Christian could have written a work like Luke-Acts after A.D. 70, impossible for us to label it Jewish-Christian and to find Jewish Christians in the church of Luke.

There is, however, a new trend in interpretation, questioning this historic scheme and opening up new ideas about Luke and his church. The situation would be quite different if there were something called Jewish Christianity, and even varied groups of Jewish Christians, in the last decades of the first Christian century—not as a marginal and apocryphal phenomenon, but as a central and dominating one. If that were true, the Jewishness of the Lucan writings would again be opened for a new interpretation. Is Luke writing from a Jewish-Christian point of view? Does he testify to the strength of Jewish Christianity at the end of the first century? If so, we can again

ask: *Quid sibi videatur Israhel?* We would hear Jewish Christianity maintaining that Christianity cannot be separated from the religious, political, and cultural fate of Israel, as Israel was and ever would be the chosen people of God.

## II. WHO ARE THE PEOPLE OF GOD?

Luke knows of only one people that deserves the Greek name *laos*, and that is Israel—the one and only people of God, with no predecessor and no successor. He uses other words for other peoples and nations or the plural, “all the peoples” (*panta ta ethne*), when he is talking about other peoples as a whole, as opposed to Israel. He even has a list of peoples (Acts 2:9ff.) but typically enough this has nothing to do with the peoples as such, but only the Jews living among them, that is, the diaspora.

Israel’s unique position as the people of God is characterized even by the fact that Israel is the only people with a history. Only this history is worth mentioning. And Luke is not satisfied by presupposing its history as we usually find it in the New Testament (Rom 4:1ff.; 11:1ff.; Gal 3:16ff.; 4:24ff.; Heb 11, etc.); instead he offers two detailed representations of the history of Israel (Acts 7:2-53; 13:16-25). The history of Israel never comes to an end, but continues without breach in the church. And it is the history of Israel that continues, nothing else. Contrary to what interpreters have told us for years, there is nothing like a bygone period of Israel for Luke. Though other peoples also have some kind of history, it is not worth mentioning; for Luke their history is an “empty” one, characterized by God’s absence (Acts 14:16). God is not a God who acts in their history; they are all left alone “to go their own way” (Acts 14:16). It is a history of idolatry and ignorance (Acts 14 and 17). By contrast, in the history of Israel, God is continuously active; he has the whole history in his hands (Acts 13:16ff.).

What then is the church? It is nothing but Israel—not a new Israel, but the one and only people of God, Israel in a new phase of history, namely, that of Jesus. This is why Luke is so occupied with pointing to the mass conversions of Jews, which end with myriads of Jews in the church (Acts 21:20). And the other people in the church are, with few exceptions, the so-called Godfearers—people who visited the synagogues, who were members taking part in the services and keeping parts of the law, but who were not circumcised. Nearly all conversions in Acts take place in

the synagogues! The previous history of the church is the history of Israel and never the history of the peoples.

The church is, in the true meaning of the word, a *Volkskirche*, a national church. Even the non-Jews are, after their conversion, incorporated into Israel and the history of the people of God (Acts 10:36ff.; 15:14ff.). The church is then the restituted people of God. It is only consistency when Luke names God as the God of Israel, and never the God of the peoples, of the gentiles, or something of the sort (Luke 1:68; 20:37; Acts 3:13; 5:30; 7:32; 13:17; 22:14; 24:14). And salvation belongs to Israel only, as a people (Luke 1:46-55, 68-79; 2:10, 25, 38). Gentiles are saved individually and incorporated into the old people of God. What is salvation but “the hope of Israel” (Acts 23:6; 26:6; 28:20)?

### III. THE ROLE OF THE LAW

It is a shibboleth for the understanding of an early Christian document's place within the history of primitive Christianity to find the role played by the law in its theology and thinking—not ethics, but the law of Moses, the torah (in the specific meaning of the word), and above all in ritual and sacrificial matters. Here, again, past interpretations of Luke-Acts have been influenced by the idea of the development of primitive Christianity, as though there were a total, dominating, “monopolized” gentile Christianity in the last decades of the first century. Thus, Luke is said to put a heavy weight on ethics in general, but not on the law of Moses. According to these interpreters, there is no strict adherence to the law in Luke's Hellenistic Christianity. When he mentions a conformity to the torah among the apostles, Paul, and other Christians, he is only pointing to the historic roots of the church. Christians in Luke's time do not follow the same way of life. They are not Jews or former Jews, but gentile Christians. The law is no longer an actual problem, unlike the situation at the time of the Pauline letters.

But this is Luke: the law of Moses consists of “living words” (Acts 7:38); not “one stroke of a letter in the law” will be dropped (Luke 16:18). Luke, supposedly not interested in the law, returns to it again and again. In the last years, we have seen a number of books and essays dealing with the role of the law in Luke's writing. We have found that Luke's obvious interest in the law does not have to do with the question of salvation, but is a determining factor in his understanding of the church as the people of God. In other words, again we have the problem, *quid sibi videatur Israhel?* The torah is the distinguishing mark of Israel; and since the church claims to be Israel, the church must keep the law—either, for the Jews in the church, the law in its totality, or, for the gentiles, the law as prescribed for them in the Scriptures, that is, the apostolic decree. Salvation has to do with the resurrection, not directly with the law. Even Jews know that there is no salvation through fulfilling the law, but solely from God's mercy. The identification of Israel with the church is decisive for the legitimacy of the promises given to Israel, since these promises could not otherwise be valid for the church as the people of God. Therefore there is no criticism of the law in Luke-Acts. His attitude toward the law is conservative, in theory and practice. Among the commands, the most important ones are those about ritual purity and the renunciation of property. This is why the question about property plays such a significant role in Luke's writings. The Christian Jews—among them, first of all, Paul—live according to the law, keeping

the sabbath and maintaining circumcision. This characterizes the church, whereas the unbelieving Jews act against the law again and again (above all, Acts 7:51). Therefore, the unrepentant Jews who oppose the Messiah-Jesus do not represent Israel of the Scriptures; they do not even belong to the chosen people any longer (Acts 3:25). All the different groups in the church have in the torah one common norm that guarantees the unity of the church, and this again demonstrates the church to be the true Israel. The church keeps the law in order to remain the people of God.

### IV. FAITHLESS PEOPLE, FAITHFUL GOD

Israel is the only chosen people, but it is not a faithful people. This has always been so. The two summaries of Israel's history in Acts 7 and 13 present a history determined by God's promises, blessings, and benefits, but also by the sins of the people. The people reject the saviors

sent by God (Acts 7:9, 25ff., 35, 39). They even become idolaters (7:39, 42ff.). Against God's will they raise a temple (7:47ff.). The people are spiritually uncircumcised and have always opposed God's spirit; they have not kept the law of Moses (7:51-53; 15:10). Israel is separated from all other peoples by the law, which, for Luke, is above all the first commandment. Not that they have kept it! But God gave this commandment to them in order to mark them as God's own people.

God's answer to the people is given through his constant renewed promises (7:5-8, 10, 16, 17ff., 33f., 35-38). In spite of their idolatry and persecutions of the prophets, he has sent them the Righteous One, the Messiah (7:52). Despite past persecutions, he sends them new prophets (Luke 1-2; Acts 2:17-18), even making them sons of the prophets (Acts 3:25). He shows them again and again his faithfulness. The decisive factor in the history of the people is not their faithfulness or faithlessness, not the sins or the piety of the people, but exclusively the faithfulness and grace of God. This is said very clearly (Acts 13:17-25). Here there is no talk of the sin of the people. It has not disappeared, but Luke wants to show what determines, leads, and furthers the history of this people. This history is determined solely by God's choice. It begins with the choosing of the fathers (Acts 13:17).

In spite of their failure, Israel is the chosen people and will forever be this people. The promises to them will be fulfilled. As it has been throughout history, so it is now, and will be in the future. The kingdom will be established for Israel (Acts 1:6; 15:14ff.; Luke 24:21). The promises of the messianic, Davidic king are confirmed before Jesus' birth and fulfilled in his resurrection and enthronement (Luke 1:31, 45ff.; Acts 2:30ff.). That the people again reject their Messiah-King is no obstacle. The fate of Jesus and the acts of the people against him are detailed in the Scriptures (Luke 18:31ff.; 24:44ff.; Acts 4:25-28; 13:27f.).

The behavior of the people does not change in the time of Jesus or thereafter. They reject not only the Messiah, but even his messengers who proclaim his resurrection to the Davidic kingdom. In Jerusalem Jesus was rejected and killed (Acts 13:27f.). The answer to that is the proclamation of the gospel to the same people (Acts 2-7). The murder of Stephen is a new rejection of the gospel. The reaction is not the rejection of the people, but the preaching of the message to other Jews (e.g., the Samaritans), to the proselytes, and above all to the Jews in the

diaspora (Acts 8:10-11, 13-20). Even here history is repeated; the gospel is rejected and the missionaries persecuted (13:46-50; 14:2ff.; 17:5ff., 13ff.; 18:6, 11ff.). We have the same story in the chapters about the legal process against Paul (Acts 21-28). Paul is accused and persecuted by the Jews (21:27-36; 22:22ff.; 23:1-11; 24:1-21; 25:1-12, 23ff.). The culmination (Acts 28:17-30) presents the last confrontation between Paul and the Jews in Rome. Paul turns against the Jews with the words of hardening and condemnation from Isaiah 6:9f., prophesying that in contrast to the Jews the gentiles will listen to the gospel (28:28). Does that mean that God now has rejected Israel? No, not even now. The words are addressed to the unbelieving and unrepentant Jews. There was no agreement among the audience (28:23-25). Some of the Jews in Rome believed the word of Paul, others did not. But this marks the completion of the mission among the Jews (Acts 1:8). The mission in the diaspora is over, the people of God not rejected, but restored. The promises are fulfilled. But the unbelieving Jews no longer belong to this people.

It is impossible for Luke to talk about a rejection of Israel as the people of God. If he did,

he could not then speak of the church as this people. The church is the old, the only people of God, now in a new epoch of history. The idea of a new Israel consisting of Jews and gentiles is inconceivable to him, and this idea is nowhere to be found in the New Testament. A gentile can never be seen as an Israelite in Luke's eyes. He never addresses gentile Christians as "sons of Israel," "Israelites," "children of Abraham," "*Ioudaioi*," "true Jews," etc.

## V. CONVERSIONS AMONG THE JEWS

Luke speaks of the divided people of God, and so he is capable of carrying through his comprehension of God's never-ending faithfulness. The basis for Luke's idea is the mass conversions among Jews and "half-Jews," the Godfearers (2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7; 8:4, 12; 9:31, 35, 42; 11:21, 24, 26; 12:24; 13:43; 14:1, 21; 16:5; 17:4, 11f.; 18:8, 10; 19:20; 21:20). There is not a single report of a mass conversion of "pure" gentiles, that is, of people outside the synagogues. These conversions, mostly unnoticed and neglected by exegetes, demonstrate to us : (1) what kind of people belong to the church, namely, people from the synagogue, i.e., Jews and Godfearers; and (2) that Israel is a divided people, an idea present already in Luke 2:34 and ending up with the "many ten thousands" of Jewish converts in Acts 21:20. There is obviously no mathematical exactness in the numbers of mass converts, but we are not allowed to ignore them or to interpret them only symbolically (as though they show the power of God and the gospel, etc.). We cannot overlook the fact that Luke saw a considerable number of Jews as members of the church. And so he could understand the church simply as Israel.

Thus, Luke has no difficulty in demonstrating the fulfillment of the promises. He has not been forced into the kind of problematical operations known from a later time, e.g., that the promises were fulfilled, but not among the people for whom they were meant. Salvation comes to the chosen people (Luke 2:10f., 29-31); the hope that Jesus would liberate Israel was not a false one (Luke 24:21, 25ff., 44ff.). The promises belong as ever to the people, and they are hereditary (Acts 2:39; 3:25ff; 10:40ff.; 13:26ff.). The Christian Jews are the sons of Israel, of Abraham and the prophets (Luke 1:16, 72; 19:10; Acts 3:25; 5:21; 7:23, 37; 9:15; 10:36).

The people are not prepared for this messianic salvation. Israel is a "warped

and crooked generation." Israel has murdered its own Messiah (Acts 2:23; 4:11, 27; 5:28, 30; 7:52; 10:39; 13:28). This is predicted in the Scriptures (Luke 18:31; 24:25-27, 44-46; Acts 13:27). The Scriptures contain in detail the history of Jesus-Messiah. Israel is fighting with God himself (Acts 5:39). In spite of this, the people remain the people of God. This fight against God has always been a part of Israel's history. It is not that Luke finds a number of faithful and pious ones among the people, thus making it possible for God to spare the whole. God's faithfulness is demonstrated in his giving an opportunity for the people to do penance (Acts 2:37ff.; 3:19f., 26). There must be a renewal of the chosen people, with a prospect of reestablishing the kingdom for Israel (Acts 1:6; 15:14ff.). This is a primary theme in Acts. And this rebuilding opens the possibility for the salvation of the gentiles, who shall join Israel (Acts 15:17f.); they are understood as the proselytes or Godfearers of the renewed people. The people *have* done penance; this is what the reports of mass conversions mean. In this renewed Israel, the law is being kept; and Messiah, Spirit, and law are the signs of Israel (Acts 7:51-53). That many Jews do not repent does not mean God's rejection of the people. Unlike all the figures given in the

notices of the mass conversions, we have no figure when it comes to the number of unrepentant and opposing Jews. Luke lets us know that enough Jews were converted to justify seeing the Christian Jews as the people, Israel. The unrepentant Jews do not represent Israel, but are being extirpated from the people (Acts 3:23). The Christian Jews constitute the singular unity, “the people,” Israel; the unrepentant Jews are individually rejected and extirpated from the people.

## VI. ISRAEL AS THE CHURCH

The concept of Israel as the church is not merely one element in the theological thought of Luke-Acts. It is the very center of Luke’s preaching and theology. It determines all parts of it.

Therefore:

- Luke gives us the most Jewish Messiah within the New Testament
- Luke does not talk about the church as a new institution or organization, but simply as “the people”
- salvation depends upon the promises given to and belonging to the people
- Luke has a very conservative theology of the law, not as a means of salvation, but as a mark of the church’s legitimacy as Israel; it is binding on Christian Jews as well as on gentiles
- Paul is the law-abiding Pharisee serving as the missionary to the Jews

These Jewish elements in the writings of Luke have always been recognized by interpreters. But they have then been neglected, underestimated, or, above all, seen as merely historical elements—having to do with the historic roots of the church, belonging to bygone times, and therefore not binding. They were not thought to represent active and constitutive elements in Luke’s own theology and thinking. But if they do, we have a new situation. Luke’s place within the history of early Christianity is quite different than we have thought for a very long time. He is not a representative of a gentile Christianity as the established church at the end of the first Christian century. Rather, he testifies to the strength and importance of Jewish Christianity in the last decades of the first century. He shows us that the church—or parts of it—was more tied to the old Israel than we used to

think. We are faced with a church at the end of the first century far more manifold than estimated, in both organization and theology. Jewish Christianity was a great power in the Christian church throughout the whole century. The break between gentile and Jewish Christianity, which ended with the Jewish Christians becoming insignificant sects separated from the established church, did not come until the second century. From that time on, gentile Christianity was victorious. But our New Testament was written in the first Christian century, at least before the decline of Jewish Christianity. And so the whole idea of the New Testament being a gentile Christian document must be revised.

The old construals, mostly of German origin, which have dominated the exegesis of Luke-Acts in the last fifty years have disintegrated—or at least some of their major features have. We find a new understanding of Luke as historian and a new perspective on his attitude toward Scripture, Israel, the law, and Jewish Christians. Is there any emerging consensus on Luke’s project? Not if we are talking about theology, and not in methodology, if we take into account the wide arsenal of methods and hermeneutical approaches. But there is some consensus about what

questions need to be asked, some agreement about what problems are to be solved—in particular the problem of the placement of Luke in the Jewish traditions of the Greco-Roman world. We realize that we have again to raise the old question: *Quid sibi videatur Israel?*